

THOMAS HARDY AND WAR

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WHEN Thomas Hardy was born, June 2, 1840, there were men living who had seen Samuel Johnson and talked with Robert Burns; Wordsworth had not yet accepted the Laureateship; Tennyson and Browning were known only to the discriminating few. In the year of the Great Exhibition, Hardy was a lad approaching his teens; he reached his majority a few weeks after the outbreak of the American Civil War. But although he grew up with the Victorians, he lived long enough to become one of the authoritative voices of a later generation. He died, it seems, only yesterday.

It is a tragic inevitability that a life span of eighty-eight years should compass many wars. Hardy lived through nearly a score of major conflicts: he knew intimately men who had fought at Waterloo, at Inkerman, at Sedan and at Passchendaele. Had he been so inclined, he might have served as a drummer boy in the Crimean War, yet he died almost ten years after the Treaty of Versailles. It follows that when Hardy speaks of the effect of war upon the individual or upon civilization, he does so with the authority of one who bases his observations not only upon the promptings of a philosophic mind, but upon concrete evidence accumulated over many years.

Most of the poets of the past fifty years who have written of war have allied themselves, consciously or otherwise, with one or the other of two antithetical groups—the ardently Imperialistic “School of Action”, whose chief apostles were Henley, Kipling and Newbolt, or the group of disillusioned pacifist propagandists, represented by Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Gibson, Richard Aldington, Wilfred Owen, and, to a lesser degree, by Robert Graves. The observations of the members of the School of Action are seldom of any great philosophic value, being too frequently distorted by the intense patriotic bias which impelled Henley to trumpet the superiority of one Englishman to ten of any other nation, and to proclaim England as the chosen instrument of God for the propagation of His justice:

Chosen daughter of the Lord,
Spouse-in-Chief of the Ancient Sword,
There's the menace of the Word
In the song on your bugles blown,
England—
Out of Heaven on your bugles blown!

On the other hand, the members of the second group, all of them active participants in the first Great War, perhaps lived too close to the event. It is impossible for them to be detached in their observations; their anguished protests against war are the protests of intensely individualistic beings who are most acutely conscious of the destruction of individuality in a welter of blood and slaughter, but sometimes only dimly conscious of the underlying causation.

Hardy was debarred by age from active service in either the Boer War or the Great War. And although he loved England—no man more, as the Wessex novels testify—he never confused love of country with insular patriotism. Consequently, when he comments upon war, he does so with a detachment which is denied to his contemporaries, and which therefore lends additional significance to his observations.

If, however, we were to consider only the evidence of the novels, it would appear that, with Hardy, war was not a subject for serious speculation. Its existence is acknowledged through the appearance from time to time of Wessex peasants and villagers in uniform,—John Loveday, Festus Derriman, Sergeant Troy—but only in *The Trumpet Major* is any attempt made to depict the effect of war upon a considerable section of society. The attempt is a limited one, and the panic which results from mob fear of a Napoleonic invasion of England is depicted as being humorous in its consequences rather than terrifying.

But it would be reasonable to expect that Hardy, in his epic poem, *The Dynasts*, which deals on a grand scale with the Napoleonic wars, would discuss the question of why men fight. It is true that the greatness of *The Dynasts* rests mainly upon the many superb passages of objective description, and upon the poet's almost Miltonic power of viewing the world's immensity from an outside vantage point, as in the account of the retreat of Napoleon's army from Moscow:

SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

And what see you on the far land-verge there,
Labouring from eastward towards our longitude?

SPIRIT OF THE PITIES

An object like a dun-piled caterpillar,
Shuffling its length in painful heaves along,
Hitherward... Yea, what is this thing we see
Which, moving as a single monster might,
Is yet not one but many?

SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

Even the Army
Which once was called the Grand; now in retreat
From Moscow's muteness, urged by That within it;
Together with its train of followers—
Men, matrons, babes in brabbling multitudes...

ANGEL 11

And so and thus it nears Smolensko's walls,
And, stayed its hunger, starts anew its crawls,
Till floats down one white morsel which appals.

What has floated down from the sky upon the Army is a flake of snow. Then come another and another, till natural features, hitherto varied with the tints of autumn, are confounded, and all is phantasmal grey and white.

The caterpillar shape still creeps laboriously nearer, but instead of increasing in size by the rules of perspective, it gets more attenuated, and there are left upon the ground behind it minute parts of itself, which are speedily flaked over, and remain as white pimples by the wayside:

SPIRIT OF THE YEARS

These atoms that drop off are snuffed-out souls
Who are enghosted by the caressing snow.

But although *The Dynasts* will likely endure by reason of such admirable descriptive passages as this, its value in philosophical commentary on the problem of war must not be overlooked. So convinced does Hardy appear to be of the inevitability of war, that in *The Dynasts* feelings of pity or horror are almost invariably subordinate to those of gloomy resignation. The Immanent Will drives men to fight; there may be protest, but there can be no effective resistance. In the words of the Semichoruses of the Years,

The Immanent Will, that urgeth all,
Rules what may or may not befall.
Ere systemed suns were globed and lit,
The slaughters of the race were writ,
And wasting wars, by land and sea,
Fixed, like all else, immutably!

And the Spirit Ironic, looking down upon the battlefield of Talavera, and seeing the weary soldiers of both armies quenching their thirst side by side at the same stream, comments, in reply to a query from the Spirit of the Pities:

It is only that Life's queer mechanics chance to work out
in this grotesque shape just now. The groping tentativeness

of an Immanent Will (as grey old Years describes it) cannot be asked to learn logic at this time of day! The spectacle of Its instruments, set to riddle one another through, and then to drink together in peace and concord, is where the humour comes in, and makes the play worth seeing!

This conception of man as the instrument of the groping, blundering Immanent Will is, of course, the very cornerstone of Hardy's philosophy, whereby the accidents of life become the manifestations of universal law, or rather, of universal disorder. The idea that an All-Prevading Power, neither good nor evil, but wanton and capricious, dominates human life and directs human energy is developed at length in the novels, notably in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Return of the Native*. It is reiterated in *The Dynasts*, where its application to war is obvious. Even Napoleon is driven by a force which is completely beyond his control, yet whose existence he hardly suspects; while the average man, the soldier of the line, moves in dumb obedience to commands which are essentially meaningless:

.....men
 Plied by the Managed for the Managers,
 To wit: by fellow-Folk who profit nought,
 For those who profit all!

If, then, we assume that *The Dynasts* constitutes Hardy's final word on war, it is obvious that his explanation of its existence is derived from the fatalistic philosophy most completely developed in the Wessex novels. But does *The Dynasts* express Hardy's final verdict? The poem is undoubtedly his *magnum opus*, but it was completed in 1903, twenty-five years before his death. Was Hardy's attitude towards war always one of resignation, in which pity was subordinate to something closely akin to apathy? The answer is to be found in his shorter poems, many of which were immediately inspired by either the Boer War or the Great War.

It is not to be expected, of course, that Hardy's attitude towards the problem of war, as defined in the shorter poems, should be at all times completely consistent, although it is one of the anomalies of human nature that while we constantly reiterate the necessity of growth and change, we seem to expect a writer to evolve a philosophy early in life and adhere to it rigidly thereafter. Hardy, however, tried to guard against the charge of inconsistency by saying that it was never his intention to be consistent.

In the preface to *Winter Words* he writes: "I also repeat, what I have often stated on such occasions, that no harmonious philosophy is attempted in these pages—or in any bygone pages of mine, for that matter."

Nearly all of Hardy's shorter war poems are "topical"—inspired by and written during the progress of actual conflict. Several of them were obviously composed when the poet was profoundly stirred by emotions of the moment, and hence do not represent his considered judgment. Of the war poems written more or less casually *between* conflicts the majority, including *San Sebastian*, *The Peasant's Confession*, and *The Alarm* are of interest mainly because they are additional indication of Hardy's preoccupation with the subject of the Napoleonic wars. But one of them, *The Man I Killed*, is of more universal significance, being an ironic description of the pitiful circumstances which compel a man to kill a fellowman with whom he has no quarrel:

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have set us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

Yes: quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

This picture of the soldier, "plied by the Managed for the Managers", recalls to mind Carlyle's celebrated description of "the net purpose and upshot of war":

To my own knowledge . . . there dwell and toil, in the British village of Dumdrudge, usually some five hundred souls. From these . . . there are successively selected, during the French war,

say thirty able-bodied men: Dumdrudge, at her own expense, has suckled and nursed them: she has, not without difficulty and sorrow, fed them up to manhood and even trained them to crafts, so that one can weave, another can build, another hammer, and the weakest can stand under thirty stone avoirdupois. Nevertheless, amid much weeping and swearing, they are selected; all dressed in red; and all shipped away . . . some two thousand miles, or say only to the south of Spain, and fed there till wanted. And now to that same spot . . . are thirty similar French artisans, from a French Dumdrudge, in like manner wending; till at length, after infinite effort, the two parties come into actual juxtaposition: and Thirty stands fronting Thirty, each with a gun in his hand. Straightway the word "Fire" is given: and they blow the souls out of one another; and in place of sixty brisk useful craftsmen, the world has sixty dead carcasses, which it must bury, and anew shed tears for. Had these men any quarrel? Busy as the Devil is, not the smallest! . . . How then? Simpleton! their Governors had fallen out; and, instead of shooting one another, had the cunning to make these poor blockheads shoot.

As we might expect, many of Hardy's "topical" war poems embody, in one form or another, the poet's conception of man the helpless automaton, controlled and directed by the whims of a capricious Will. In several, however, there is the implication that human rather than demonic agency is frequently responsible for the catastrophe of war. One point emerges clearly: Hardy was not a pacifist, but he despised any military action that savoured, however remotely, of aggression. Perhaps for that reason, the poems which were inspired by the Boer War are full of doubts and questionings: the poet views with sad bewilderment the departure from England of the battalions which

. . . . press for further strands,
To argue in the selfsame bloody mode
Which this late age of thought, and pact, and code,
Stil fails to mend.

And, at the time when Kipling was writing his rollicking *Absent-Minded Beggar*, and

I wish my mother could see me now, with a fence-post under
my arm,
And a knife and spoon in my puttees that I found on a Boer farm,

Hardy was quietly telling his *Christmas Ghost Story*:

South of the line, inland from far Durban,
A mouldering soldier lies—your countryman.
Awry and doubled up are his grey bones,
And on the breeze his puzzled phantom moans

Nightly to clear Canopus: "I would know
 By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law
 Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,
 Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?
 And what of logic or of truth appears
 In tacking 'Anno Domini' to the years?
 Nearly twenty-hundred liveried thus have hied,
 But tarries yet the Cause for which He died."

But the issues at stake in the World War aroused no doubts or questionings. Hardy was a man slow to anger, but the rape of Belgium stirred his fiercest indignation and provoked such outburst as *The Belgian Expatriation* and *The Cry of the Homeless*. One poem of the early war period, *The Pity of It*, written in April, 1915, is of peculiarly tragic significance to-day, when we are once more debating the question of war guilt:

I walked in loamy Wessex lanes, afar
 From rail-track and from highway, and I heard
 In field and farmstead many an ancient word
 Of local lineage like "Thu bist", "Er war".

"Ich woll", "Er sholl", and by-talk similar,
 Nigh as they speak who in this month's moon gird
 At England's very loins, thereunto spurred
 By gangs whose glory threats and slaughters are.

Then seemed a Heart crying: "Whosoever they be
 At root and bottom of this, who flung this flame
 Between kin folk kin tongued even as are we,

"Sinister, ugly and lurid be their fame;
 May their familiars grow to shun their name,
 And their brood perish everlastingly."

Most of the poetry which was inspired by the Great War is consistent in its protest against the unnatural struggle between "kin folk kin tongued". It is consistent, too, in its expression of almost savage hatred for the men who have been responsible for setting the feet of legions marching once more across the battlefields of Europe. But perhaps the "topical" poems, many of them written in the heat of anger, do not constitute Hardy's considered judgment on the question of war. Certainly the philosophy of *The Pity of It* appears to be at variance with that of *The Dynasts*. The Kaiser is driven by a mad lust for conquest which arises within himself; but Napoleon is, in a sense, beyond praise or blame. He is the Man of Destiny. What did Hardy really believe? Did he believe that war was

the consequence of human ambition and human passion and hence ultimately susceptible to human control, or did he believe that even the leaders of men were in their turn at the mercy of a Power infinitely greater than themselves—the helpless puppets of the Immanent Will?

In 1899 Hardy asked this question:

“How long, O striving Teutons, Slavs and Gaels,
Must your wroth reasonings trade in lives like these,
That are as puppets in a playing hand?—
When shall the saner, softer politics,
Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land
And patriotism, grown godlike, scorn to stand
Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?”

The question is answered in the most tragic of all Hardy's poems,—one which is printed near the end of *Winter Words*, his last volume of verse, published posthumously in 1928. The time when “safer, saner politics” will hold sway throughout the countries of the earth will never come. There is no solution to the problem of war. Leagues of Nations and World Federations must inevitably fail; man is destined to fight. *We Are Getting to the End* is substantially a re-statement of the philosophy of *The Dynasts*. The world's great conquerors, the world's ruthless killers—Attila the Hun, Tamburlaine the Great, Napoleon, Hitler—are one and all driven by the demonic urge, are one and all the creatures of the blind and lawless and destructive Immanent Will. The helpless instruments of an inexorable Destiny, they merely direct those slaughters of the race, which were decreed “ere systemed suns were globed and lit:”

We are getting to the end of visioning
The impossible within this universe,
Such as that better whiles may follow worse,
And that our race may mend by reasoning.

We know that even as larks in cages sing,
Unthoughtful of deliverance from the curse
That holds them lifelong in a latticed hearse,
We ply spasmodically our pleasuring.

And that when nations set them to lay waste
Their neighbours' heritage by foot and horse,
And hack their pleasant plains in festering seams,
They may again,—not warely, or from taste,
But tickled mad by some demonic force.—
Yes. We are getting to the end of dreams!